

### *5th Sunday of Easter, C*

Back in the eighteenth century, the Scottish poet, Robert Burns offered this brief prayer:

“O would some power the gift to give us,  
To see ourselves as other see us.”

That is a difficult prayer to answer in fact almost impossible; but still it is a worthwhile thought. Once in a while, we should at least try to see ourselves as others see us. This would be a healthy exercise for the church, to try to see ourselves through the eyes of the world. Those people out there who never go to church, who have no interest in religion –how do you suppose we look to them? When they cast a look in our direction, what do you think they see?

Now, to become obsessed with questions like that would be definitely not good. Our main concern, as individual Christians and as the church, is not to please the world but to please the Lord. But, on the other hand we have a relationship with and a responsibility to the world and it does matter how they see us.

Jesus seems to be suggesting that in our Gospel reading for today. Listen again to what he said: “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

That certainly implies that other people will be looking at us, evaluating us, and we should have some concern for the kind of impression we make on them. So let’s try for a few moments to offer and answer

Robert Burns' prayer on our own behalf, to see ourselves as others see us. In your imagination, put yourself outside the church, and then look back. What do you see? How do we look in the eyes of the world?

To start with, we need to remind ourselves that we are under observation. The world does look at us, at least occasionally. They don't stare at us, and they probably don't spend a lot of time thinking about us; but once in a while they cast a look in our direction.

There is something in the human heart that is permanently religious. And no man can leave the church, the gospel, thoughts about God, and the issues of faith out of his life completely. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "Man cannot live by bread alone." It is not enough to just feed the body. There is a spiritual longing deep in the heart of all people; so once in a while, they look toward the church. They may not know much about what we say and do here; but there is a little part of them that hopes it's true.

There was a time when the world persecuted the church. Now it seems to mostly ignore us, but not entirely. We are under observation, whether we know it or not. I remember a bit of verse that says:

"You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day  
By the deeds that you do, by the words that you say.  
Men read what you write whether faithless or true.  
Say, what is the gospel according to you?"

The world does look at us, at least once in a while. What kind of impression do we make? How do we look through the eyes of others? Well, I am certain that much of what we say and do makes little or no impression on an unbelieving world.

Take, for example our theological system and our doctrinal system. How much attention do you suppose the world really pays to those? And this is not to suggest that theology and doctrine are unimportant, for such is not the case. They are important. We, in the church, are deeply thankful to theologians across the centuries who have tried to help us think through and better understand our faith.

But we are attempting now to look at ourselves through the eyes of the world, and I am saying that for the most part these people could care less about our theology. We will never impress or influence or win the world by proving that we are doctrinally pure or theologically correct. And I hate to admit this next point, but I seriously doubt that we impress the world very much with our preaching, even our best preaching. Let's not fool ourselves – the people outside the church pay very little attention to what the church has to say. The majority does not even hear it; and of those who do, many, remain unconvinced.

We are talking about our impression on the world, and I am saying that the world cares little for accuracy of our theology or the eloquence of our words.

Listen once more to our text. Jesus said, “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

In other words, the most impressive and convincing evidence of our faith is love. And when the world looks at us that really what they are looking for. They don’t care much about anything else. Sermons are easy to ignore and even easier to forget. And all of our theological debates, to people outside the church, must surly seem like “a tempest in a teapot.”

But if they look at us and see people who truly care about people, that is hard to ignore and almost impossible to forget. Jesus has been remembered across the centuries as a man who loved all kinds of people with an unconditional love. And he has commanded us to do the very same thing, to love others as he has loved us. Let that become the reputation of this church, let that become the habit of our lives, and people will know that we are his disciples.

When the world looks at us what do they see? I don’t know. But I could hope they would see a group of people who love each other and who honestly, deeply care about all people everywhere. **Amen.**